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Save the Everglades marriage



By Bob Graham

Special to The Post

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By **BOB GRAHAM**

Like many Floridians, I followed with great interest the announcement that our state has tentatively agreed to buy U.S. Sugar Corp. for \$2.2 billion and use nearly 200,000 acres of company farmland to enhance water flows across America's Everglades. As with any transaction, we should scrutinize the fine print. But Florida's leaders deserve credit for at least exploring what could be another critical step in the restoration of our unique "River of Grass."

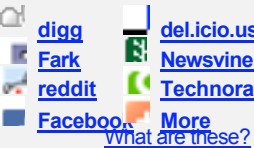


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Unfortunately, some federal officials seem willing to let Everglades restoration languish in the Washington political swamp. In November, President Bush vetoed the Water Resources Development Act that would have authorized water projects across the nation, including initiatives to restore America's Everglades. Sen. John McCain has voiced his support for the president's unfortunate veto.

Traditionally, Congress has passed a water bill each even-numbered year. The 2000 bill included the Everglades Restoration Act, a product of almost 20 years of state and federal action and negotiation. That legislation cemented a marriage between Florida and Washington over revitalization of the Everglades, with each partner assuming an equal share of decision-making and cost. The fruits of the union were to be 60 projects - to remove levees and increase water storage - that would restore natural water flow through the Everglades. Of the 535 senators and representatives, only one opposed the nuptials.

The 2000 bill authorized the first few Everglades projects, with the expectation that Congress would authorize additional projects in subsequent legislation. But partisan and regional politics intervened. The 2002 bill stalled over Missouri River dams. In 2006, there was a fight over the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. As a result, the nation went seven years without a new Water Resources Development Act.

With each battle, the Everglades was caught in the crossfire. Congress failed to authorize projects critical to restoration, which prevented those initiatives from even being considered for federal financing. Meanwhile, Florida exceeded the state's obligation - paying over \$2 billion while it waited. Since one partner doing all the work is no way to sustain a marriage, the state-federal union to restore the Everglades was headed for the rocks.

But in 2007, a new Congress passed a water bill containing delayed Everglades projects. When President Bush vetoed the bill, Congress overwhelmingly overrode his veto. Everglades restoration was back on track.

But this honeymoon period may be short-lived unless Congress changes the way it approves water projects like those in the Everglades. Restoring natural water flows south of Lake Okeechobee or wetlands in Wisconsin always will be in jeopardy if they are tied to more controversial canal-widening projects in Alabama or dams in South Dakota. It makes good policy sense to divorce water restoration initiatives from typical water projects.

First, restoration initiatives like the Everglades are more likely to enjoy bipartisan support. Second, Everglades-like efforts are often more cost-effective because the federal government shares the expense with states, cities or other non-federal partners. Third, where most water development projects need legislative authorization only once, the Everglades and similar restoration ventures require multiple congressional approvals over time. If one project is delayed, the entire initiative becomes stalled.

Fortunately, there is a better way. Students and faculty at the University of Florida's Levin College of Law and Graham Center for Public Service have drafted legislation - tentatively entitled the National Water Restoration Act - that has support from environmental and conservation organizations.

The concept is simple. If a project is designed to maintain, enhance, or reverse assaults on water quality and ecosystems, and the initiative involves watershed planning between state or local and federal agencies, it would be considered separately. Without the burden of Water Resources Development Act controversy, restoration projects could be considered fast enough to ensure that they are implemented on time, financed within budget and delivered as planned.

Nearly eight years after the wedding, there should be no question about Florida's commitment to the state-federal Everglades marriage. But Washington has yet to fully reciprocate. With the enactment of the National Water Restoration Act, Congress and the president can strengthen the bonds of Everglades restoration.

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John Bartosek, Editor, The Palm Beach Post.

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